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Nato

## Bad news briefing

While the United States conducts its customary pre-budget arguments about Russian military intentions (see page 47), Nato is preparing an extraordinary briefing for senior officials of its member countries. It all started last September, when the member countries' ambassadors to Nato and most of their chiefs of staff visited the United States. Mr Donald Rumsfeld, the outgoing American secretary of defence, had both groups given an above-top-secret intelligence briefing, including the most sensitive kinds of information in America's files. The results so im-

pressed—the visitors that they asked for the information to be presented in each Nato capital as soon as possible. The United States agreed to release most of the material to Nato's intelligence chief, a Danish general, who will lead the briefing in a few weeks.

Nato has no intelligence collection service of its own, and relies on what its member countries give it. The United States alone has the resources for large-scale satellite reconnaissance and detailed communications analysis. Although the United States has always supplied Nato with fairly good intelligence material, the raw data—particularly from the vital satellite photography—have seldom been released because Nato can be a leaky place.

With recent advances in satellite technology it is possible literally to watch a ship being built, or to count tank production, by putting together a series of photographs taken from the same position in space at frequent intervals; it is like elapsed-time photography of a flower growing. In another major technical breakthrough, the United States has in the past two years begun to operate an advanced satellite system which can transmit pictures to the ground while it is still in the air, instead of having to bring the pictures back weeks later. This "real-time" information will have far-reaching effects. One of them is to make it more difficult for the Russians to mount a surprise attack.

But the Russians seem to have the possibility of a surprise attack in mind. Two of the main facts which emerged from last month's Nato ministerial meetings were the rate of Russian nuclear submarine construction—14 a year at present, a significant increase over previous estimates—and the amount of equipment the Soviet army has deployed in central Europe, particularly mundane things such as trucks and tank transporters (1800 of these showed up in the first estimate of them ever released). Although not as glamorous as tanks or fighter aircraft, such things mean that the Russians, who used to be tied to the railroads, can now attack in strength without a prior mobilisation which would give away their intentions.

Other figures for the Russian military construction programme, released by the Americans include the continuing production of 46 minor combatant ships a year and 11 aircraft for every American one, and an increase to 20 major combatant ships a year, 7.3 tanks for every American one, and 5

Russians are planning a war. They do mean that, if a war comes, Russia will be better equipped in some things than western planners used to think, and that it is getting stronger faster.